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Impact: Striking a blow or walking together?

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If, in future reinventions of research audit, agonising about the state of the discipline and its governance is introduced as a new strand of assessment, every UK geography department will breathe a heavy sigh of relief: at last we can claim global excellence while keeping steady eye contact. It is easy to point out that many UK geographers are in fact privileged in comparison with others elsewhere. But while parochial in its focus, this set of statements on impact has some wider implications for how critical and radical geographers work in times of austerity, when, as Michelle Fine (2012, 3) puts it, “aggressive calls for ‘evidence’ reflect a Foucaultian deflection from deep accountability”.

I discuss the form of impact looming over UK geographers only as *at risk* of being produced; it is in process, and I’m hopeful that we can shape its emergent form wisely. So this paper is dedicated to every anxious meeting of REF impact sub-committees and working groups in the bowels of geography departments around the country, and to REF panel members, who by 2014 will have played a role in shaping what impactful geography becomes. Preparations for the first audit of impact, which are drawing to a close as this issue is published, have resulted in a new technocratic expertise among academic managers who may have little previous knowledge of the activity they are reshaping. There are already grounds for the concerns echoed elsewhere that the over-zealous production and representation of research specifically for audit risks damage to existing drivers, processes, relationships and outcomes of research that makes a difference (see Rogers et al., this issue).



With others who have practiced action-oriented geography for many years, I cautiously welcomed the notice that impact would be recognised for the first time. Many more UK academics have asked whether it is an attack on intellectual autonomy by an interfering and ideologically driven state. Both responses have grounds: but there's a tension in making this second claim when it is only made of impact and not the journal articles that have always carried most weight in research audit. Constructs such as autonomy and curiosity don't exist in a power-free vacuum, and often work to entrench elite academics' grip on knowledge production (Pain et al., 2011). This is not a statement supporting greater state regulation – my concern is to defend research conducted in collaboration and solidarity with organisations and movements that share left, feminist and anti-racist politics.

Because there's a disjuncture for us, as Anglo-American critical and radical geographers, between our politics as espoused in the pages of our journals (do we believe in social justice? are we about challenging inequalities? are our politics broadly on the left?) and the ways we play along as academic production and practices become more competitive, commodified and polarized along lines of existing advantage. Lawrence Berg (2012) is one of very few to persistently point out this uncomfortable truth (compare with the worrying tactics of Fivestar, 2012). The form of the UK impact agenda might become part of this trend, potentially constraining rather than enabling a critical and radical geography that works for social justice.

I am characterizing this disjuncture with some exaggeration for the purposes of impact, though in some places the characterisation is not too far from reality. What is clear – but rarely the subject of UK academics' discontent with the developing notion of impact – is that it centres on power. While impact may at first glance look like an opportunity for academics to challenge the unjust expressions and effects of power through research, there is a risk that the particular meaning of impact reproduced ends up entrenching hierarchical forms of power/knowledge relations within the academy, and between the academy and wider society (Ceuit, 2009). First, its framing is currently more likely to encourage geographers to ask “how can we strategise for maximum impact on users with our research?” rather than “how can we open up academic knowledge and collaborate with other (non-academic) researchers with shared political goals?” Second, the scaling of the activities and outcomes that are rewarded through the impact agenda, are crucial (Pain et al., 2011) – whether it gives most reward to research impacting on non-academic partners in powerful positions such as industry, government and policy organisations working at the national/international scale.² As Glyn Williams and Paula Meth have pointed out, this outcome carries the danger of squeezing out participatory and collaborative research at a local scale with small organisations, grassroots movements and activists (see Dawdon Hill Village Cooperative, 2010).

² In response to this critique, the final guidance states that “the criterion of ‘reach’ for impacts does not refer specifically to a geographic scale” (HEFCE 2011, 45).

It also leaves student community research through teaching programmes out in the cold (Fellow, forthcoming). At the current time, deep cuts made by the UK coalition government have resulted in squeezed resources across the UK public sector and reduced funding to the voluntary sector by up to 70%, particularly hitting small community organisations: a crisis that only furthers the argument for a different approach to which impacts from our research our valued, who we work with, and how.

Feminist voices have been very quiet about the impact agenda (with the troubling exception of Fotheringbottom-Shifts, 2009). What would a feminist analysis of impact look like, and what alternatives would it entail? 'Impact', according to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, means 'striking', 'collision', 'influence', 'effect'. An impact is a single significant blow, with a linear temporal track from incident to effect: reflected in the ways that pathways to impact are conceived of, measured and rewarded through REF. Both the term, and the forms of impact at risk of being privileged, have resonance with masculine forms of power/knowledge relations. We can read this in the language of reach and significance; in the focus on outcomes rather than process; in the scaling of activities that are rewarded (unless this is avoided); in the relative positions of the organisations and movements outside of Universities that will benefit and lose out in terms of partnerships with academics; in the fissures between the Universities that do well and do badly in the exercise; and among the individual academics most likely to benefit (not the growing part time, casualised workforce, or feminist researchers).

The mechanisms by which this agenda emerged are complex. We are as culpable as the policy technocrats we often blame, as everyday practices in HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) are also producing the nature of impact. Over the years in the UK, we have seen the RAE/REF bar continually raised, leading departments that can and do play to chase an elitist and exclusionary notion of research excellence that has so far been upscaled in every iteration. One past effect of this (boosting anxiety now) was a reduction in the time available for what is now labelled research impact. For the most part, the white whingeing continues and so does business as usual. Risk aversion means that we have tended to follow the rules rather than reshape them. Often, an underlying sense of comfort with the shape of audit plays its part too.

What would impact inspired by feminist praxis look like? My understanding of feminist politics is that it is manifest and made through particular practices, the quiet politics articulated by Kye Askins (forthcoming); it involves us in reciprocal, collaborative relations with each other that are both deep and flat, in opposition to hegemonic power. Instead of a linear notion of impact as striking a blow, feminist knowledge co-production is relational, taking place through a more diverse and porous series of smaller transformative actions that arise through learning among all of those involved. Prioritising this form of impact would support sustainable and

reciprocal research relationships at all scales; practices that are more widespread and better established outside of the UK.

I promised to exaggerate, and this binary account doesn't do justice to the real life impacts of geographers, some of whom are working creatively with and between the extremes of loud/public/one-way/high-scale/single-blow impact versus quiet/two-way/local/iterative/processual impact. Alternative infrastructures supporting participatory and activist research exist (mrs kinpaisby, 2008)³; but their position is often uneasy and fragile. While the main driver of impact for HEIs is progress in a global marketplace rather than deep accountability, the polarization warns us what could be.

Competition has become academic lifeblood: hardwired into academic production through institutional demands, the way we have adapted to these and police ourselves and each other, and into the language and performance of preparations for the REF in Universities around the UK. Can we retain the principles of collaboration and social justice - supposedly the lifeblood of critical and radical geography - in impactful research? Should we be striking a blow, or walking together?

References

To maintain standards of quality and value for public money, I have graded each reference in line with the system to be used in the forthcoming UK REF for assessing the impact of research. Gradings range from 4* ("outstanding impacts in terms of reach and significance") to Unclassified ("the impact is of little or no reach and significance; or the impact was not eligible; or the impact was not underpinned by excellent research") (HEFCE 2011, 44).

Askins, Kye. Forthcoming. Being together: everyday geographies and the quiet politics of befriending. *ACME: an International E-journal for Critical Geographies* [Current projected impact: 4*]

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³ See the debate at <http://antipodefoundation.org/2012/10/15/symposium-on-the-participatory-geographies-research-groups-communifesto-for-fuller-geographies-towards-mutual-security/>.

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- mrs kinpaisby. 2008. Taking stock of participatory geographies: envisioning the communiversity. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33 (3), 292-99. ["Was that whole thing a joke?"]
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